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# Vietnam echoes in city feud - Los Angeles Times

*My-Thuan Tran*

7-9 minutes

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The protesters gathered outside City Hall, marking another day of anger. They waved South Vietnamese flags, yelled into bullhorns and held signs saying “No Democracy in San Jose.” Down the street, a fellow activist was on Day 19 of his hunger strike.

Eighteen floors above the spectacle, Madison Nguyen attended to city business. From her office, the chants of “Down with Madison” or the placards with a slash drawn across her smiling face couldn’t be seen or heard. But the repercussions can be felt everywhere in San Jose’s Vietnamese community.

Only months earlier, Nguyen was embraced as the beloved daughter of the ethnic community. Now, some constituents are calling her a traitor and communist sympathizer.

“My only intent was to bring a positive image to the Vietnamese,” said Nguyen, 33. “I didn’t know I was opening up a big can of worms.”

San Jose’s Vietnamese community has been torn for more than eight months over what to name the city’s first Vietnamese shopping district, a decision that might seem mundane if not for

the fact that it cuts to the deepest sensibilities in one of the country's largest Vietnamese American communities.

The councilwoman's position -- a compromise selected from half a dozen suggestions -- was taken as an insult.

The street protests that followed underscored again that the rules of politics are different for a Vietnamese American politician, who must navigate the lingering emotions of a community still defined by the Vietnam War.

Even business owners, reporters, and pop singers carefully tiptoe around inferences and innuendo that can cast a person as being soft on communism.

A misstep can launch vocal protests and accusations; reputations can be tarnished. Most bow to the pressure.

Madison Nguyen, however, has played her hand differently. She said she was willing to risk votes and upset constituents to exert her political independence.

It's a risky gambit in places such as San Jose and Orange County, where Vietnamese American politicians rely on the ethnic community as their base and where the mood is colored by the loudest voices.

## Fled Vietnam

Like many of her critics, Nguyen escaped Vietnam in the late 1970s. She was 4.

Her family eventually migrated to Modesto, where Nguyen and her eight siblings helped her parents pick cherries and apricots after school. While attending UC Santa Cruz, Nguyen skipped classes to protest with farm workers for higher wages.

Nguyen became a history major and changed her name from Phuong to Madison to honor former president James Madison.

She started a doctoral program studying the evolution of the Vietnamese American community. She won a seat on the Franklin-McKinley school board in San Jose and became the city's first Vietnamese American councilwoman in 2005.

Her eagerness to be independent and to strike compromises has rubbed some the wrong way.

She believes the Vietnamese community is going through “growing pains” and at times lacks an understanding of how local government works, but some see Nguyen as young, immature, failing to be deferential.

“I feel that when [Vietnamese] people look at me, they feel that I am their daughter instead of an elected official,” she said.

### Naming choices

When Nguyen proposed naming the Vietnamese retail district along Story Road, there was a push to incorporate the name of the fallen capital of South Vietnam, as in Little Saigon or New Saigon. Other proposed names, including Vietnamtown or Vietnamese Business District, were criticized as glorifying the communist country.

Nguyen initially refused to choose sides but finally proposed a compromise: Saigon Business District. She thought it would placate her constituents because Saigon had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Her council colleagues sided with her.

But the protests outside City Hall grew louder and bigger. One rally drew 2,500; a council hearing attracted more than 1,000. She

wasn't invited to the annual Tet festival, a snub in the Vietnamese community.

"A non-Vietnamese can have the excuse of misunderstanding the sentiment of our community," said Tom Vuong, 63. "But she is one of us."

At the recent council meeting, Nguyen sat poker faced for 6 1/2 hours as hundreds in the community chastised her. Many invoked the memories of war.

"My family lost everything. Everything!" said a young man wearing a Little Saigon sticker.

Some council members apologized, saying they had misgauged the Vietnamese community's fervor. But Nguyen refused to apologize.

"I can't just represent a small segment or the most vocal segment of the community," she said.

In the past, Vietnamese American politicians who have failed to cater to the vocal rallying calls have come under fire.

Tony Lam, the first Vietnamese American elected official, had his Westminster restaurant picketed for two months when he failed to show up during the massive 1999 protests against a store owner who displayed communist icons.

Lam said he was following the advice of the city attorney, but the protests continued.

Little seems to have changed in Vietnamese politics, said Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde, a UC Davis professor who spoke in Nguyen's defense at the meeting.

Some of the hundreds who signed a petition disagreeing with the “tactics” of the Little Saigon supporters say they have been castigated as communist sympathizers.

“We need to change the way Vietnamese Americans have conducted politics in the last 30 years through intimidation and tough tactics that silence so many of us,” said Valverde.

To Nguyen, the district naming is a test of whether the community is ready to move forward.

“I look at the situation and I say, ‘You can either bring down the Vietnamese community or you can elevate the image of the Vietnamese community.’ That’s always in the back of my mind.”

But the daily gossip about Nguyen rages at the Vietnamese coffee houses, where some accuse her of acting with with the communist government or conducting “back door dealings” with a developer to name the area. Some among them suggest it may not be too late for Nguyen to repair her reputation.

“We want her to learn to be better,” said Barry Hung Do, a Little Saigon supporter. He suggests that the councilwoman hold a community meeting, explain herself and ask for forgiveness.

Nguyen said she has lost sleep over the issue, but she bursts into chuckles when she tells of community leaders wanting her to “get permission” before proposing the district name.

“If I ask one person, I have to ask 96,000 other people,” Nguyen said. “I don’t have the time or the energy to go ask for everyone’s permission whenever I want to do something.”

Residents decide

Earlier this month, the City Council rejected naming the area Little

Saigon and gave business owners and residents the right to decide.

A week later, officials signed an agreement with protesters allowing a sign to be erected in the area. "Welcome to Little Saigon," it will read, even though the area will lack such an official designation.

Some called it a victory. The hunger striker immediately stopped his protest.

Nguyen said she hopes things can get back to normal so she can focus on other problems in her district.

Little Saigon backers remain weary. They are now trying to remove her from office.

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